



# VOX CLAMANTIS IN DESERTO: THE JOHANNESSCHÜSSEL: SENSES AND SILENCES

**Barbara Baert**

## **Abstract**

*The Johannesschüssel, also called Caput Iohannis in Disco or Saint John's head on a platter, is a late medieval/early modern type of sculpture that was common in parts of Europe north of the Alps. The functions and uses of the Johannesschüssel are complex and heterogeneous. In this essay, I focus less on specific case studies, and more on the phenomenon of the Johannesschüssel, offering an interpretation of the relationship between these objects and the sensory apparatus.*

**Keywords:** John the Baptist, *Johannesschüssel*, senses, speech, sight, silence, platter

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## **Biographical note**

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# VOX CLAMANTIS IN DESERTO: THE JOHANNESSCHÜSSEL: SENSES AND SILENCES<sup>1</sup>

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On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

Matthew 14:6–12

That was the movement that struck John the Baptist's head from his body ... it is utterly ancient. In the Orient it is innate to every man. Perhaps it is what first distinguished humans as a species, after the interval when they were part human, part animal... According to current wisdom, being human began with the opposable thumb, which made it possible to pick up a weapon or a tool. But perhaps being human begins with the soul and not the thumb. I don't know ...

Sándor Márai, *Embers*, 2001

During the Middle Ages, the head of St John the Baptist was widely venerated. Mark 6:14–29 and Matthew 14:1–12 tell of John the Baptist's death. Herod has John imprisoned for protesting against his marriage to Herodias, who had been his brother's wife, on grounds of incest. Later, the daughter of Herodias dances at a banquet, and the king is so charmed that he

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Figure 5.1. Relic of the skull of St. John (before 1206). Amiens, Cathedral. (Photo: author)

promises to give her anything she might wish. Spurred on by her mother, she asks for the head of John the Baptist. The king grants her wish, and the girl brings the severed head on a dish (*in disco*) and presents it to her mother. John's followers learn of what has happened and bury his body.

The existence of a head relic is mentioned from the twelfth century onwards in letters and registries from the East (Semoglu, 2000, pp.217–33). In fact, after the Fourth Crusade of 1204, what might be called a small deluge of supposed Saint John skulls washes over the West. No fewer than twelve skulls were accounted for by the end of the middle ages (Réau, 1956, pp.431–63; Arndt and Kroos, 1969, p.245). Most popular of these skull relics was undoubtedly that of Amiens (Figure 5.1) (Rückert, 1957, pp.7–36; Pardiac, 1886; Salmon, 1876; Breuil, 1846, pp.3–90; Du Cange, 1665). Brought back from the crusades by Walo of Sarton, it had allegedly been found walled up in Constantinople. The *translatio* legend of Walo has it that the head was originally located on a costly platter with a silver cover, but Walo sold the platter for a lot of money (Arndt and Kroos, 1969, p.245). To this day, the cathedral of Genoa claims to possess this 'original' platter relic made of brown agate (Arndt and Kroos, 1969, pp.252–3).

It is precisely this moment, during the age of the crusades, that the new image type comes into being, simulating St John's head on a platter (Figure 5.2). From the 13th century on, the *Johannesschüssel* was sculpted in wide parts of Europe, especially north of the Alps. The production of these objects reached



Figure 5.2: *Johannesschüssel* in limestone (early 16th century), Cologne, Schnütgen-Museum. (Cologne, Museum Schnütgen, Inv. K 156. Photo: Soetkin Vanhauwaert)

its height around 1500. The phenomenon of the *Johannesschüssel* in the late medieval and early modern period is the subject of this essay. The *Johannesschüssel* is an image type that sprang from both text and relic. It is also an image type that presents death. This death is not an ordinary death; it is the mother of all deaths: the decapitation of the last of the prophets, the *precursor* (*prodromos*), i.e. the Forerunner of Jesus Christ, and the *proto-martyr* (Gauthier, 2012). The functions and the uses of the *Johannesschüssel* are complex and heterogeneous according to the period of their production, to the localisation of any particular veneration and finally, to the medium and/or material in which the object was fabricated. Of course, not all these methodological problems can be treated here; yet, a focus on the way the medieval beholder (and user) of this specific instrument of devotion is mediated by the senses touches upon facets of the larger research questions mentioned above (Vanhauwaert and Geml, 2014). As is to be shown, the *Johannesschüssel* does not only address the sense of sight, but also other senses like the hearing and speech.

In what follows, I will distinguish three levels for interpreting the specific relationship between the sensory apparatus and the *Johannesschüssel*: the relationship between word and image as speech and sight (1), the absorbing gaze and the appeal to the complete sensorium (2) and finally, the phenomenological tension between head and visage that leads to a reflection on the role of silence in the revelation of divine, cosmic truth (3).

## 1. Word and image as speech and sight

The mystic Gertrud of Helfta (1256–1301 or 1302) describes her vision of John the Baptist: how young and handsome the saint appeared to her, though he is everywhere depicted so gruesomely (Arndt and Kroos, 1969, p.266; *Revelationes Gertrudianae*, 1875, p.418). The passage is interesting because it tells us that, in the midst of its horror, the appearance of the Forerunner offers her a paradoxical beauty.

The *Johannesschüssel* displays death and horror, sometimes in a more exhibitionist fashion than others. Some heads have open mouths, others protruding tongues. Some have open, staring eyes, others are half-closed. Sometimes the bloody neck is emphasised, while in other instances confronting the face suffices. The suffering visage of the *Johannesschüssel* is ambivalent. It is macabre according to the story of the decapitation, but the expression on its face represents at the same time death by martyrdom, which typologically elevates horror into sacrifice for God. And as Forerunner, the *Johannesschüssel* evokes a 'nobility' that is fitting and equal to Christ.

If the *Johannesschüssel* is aesthetically ambivalent, so is the way it stimulates the viewer's response. How are we to interpret the exchange of glances between a dead head and a living viewer? Can such a head, in other words, have 'active' effects? And are there other senses involved than sight alone?

Many *Johannesschüsseln* bear an inscription. The dish is not only bearer of the head, but also bearer of the word. The borders of the dish possess the perfect tectonics for this purpose; usually they simply report 'CAPUT JOHANNIS IN DISCO', as if the head thereby acquires greater legitimacy. Another frequently occurring inscription is the central pronouncement of the gospels: 'DA MIHI HIC IN DISCO CAPUT JOANNIS BAPTISTAE'.<sup>2</sup> The *Johannesschüssel* is identified here on the basis of the Bible (Matthew 14:8) and the speech that would lead to the notorious beheading. The inscription literally makes the *Johannesschüssel* out to be an interactive object that can be moved from place to place, as we can see in the liturgical and performative uses of the dish. The phrase 'NON SURREXIT INTER NATOS MULIERUM MAJOR JOANNE BAPTISTE'<sup>3</sup> (Matthew 11:11) is also quite popular: we read it on the dish from Cluny, on the papier-mâché exemplar in Leuven (Figure 5.3) and on the ceramic version in the Münster Landesmuseum (Arndt and Kroos, 1969, p.300). *Guillelmus Durandus*' (c.1235–96) panegyric on the feast of St John begins with this pronouncement, and it was also disseminated

2 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist'.

3 'Among those born of women no one has appeared who is greater than John the Baptist'.





Figure 5.3: *Johannesschüssel* (c.1500), papier-maché (with epigraph). Leuven, Museum 'M'. (© M - Museum Leuven / photo: Paul Laes)



Figure 5.4: *Johannesschüssel* (13th century, platter 16th century), Naumburg, Domschatzgewölbe. (Bildarchiv der Vereinigten Domstifter zu Merseburg und Naumburg und des Kollegiatstifts Zeitz / photo: Guido Siebert)

in 14th-century hymns, as demonstrated by a manuscript from the cloister of Engelberg: 'Inter natos mulierum, Hic Iohannes vas sincerum Principatum tenuit' (Arndt, Kroos, 1969, p.299; Kehrein, 1873, p.356).<sup>4</sup> The 'Inter natos' phrase is indicative of the comparative link between John and Christ, because the words are those of Christ himself. Because we

<sup>4</sup> 'Among those born of women, this John has the true primacy'.

simultaneously read and see, Christ and John are woven into a single soteriology.

Another epigraph – 'MERETRIX SVADET, PVELA SALTAT, REX JUBET, SANCTUS DECOLLATUR' – is inscribed on the 16th-century reliquary dish of Naumburg (the head is 13th century) (Figure 5.4). 'The harlot urges, the girl dances, the king commands and the saint is beheaded': these words refer to a sequence of the *In decollatione sancti Iohannis Baptistae* by Godescalc (†1050) (Kehrein, 1873, p.352). The hymn was widespread in manuscript form until well into the middle ages, and thereafter in print, and had an influence on theatre. The 15th-century Afselder Passion Play simply instructs the choir tersely 'Choras cantat: Meretrix uadet' (Grein, 1874, p.28).<sup>5</sup> The Naumburg inscription reduces the narrative to four essences: urging, dancing, commanding and beheading. But dancing, jubilating, speaking and singing are also the sensual share of looking at images – what is more, in the middle ages they actively participated in the process of perceiving and experiencing the visual (Boerner, 2008, p.208).

A *Johannesschüssel* in relief in the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe features the inscription: 'EN QUO PERIT IUSTUS QUASI NON SIT DEO DILECTUS/CUM SIT EIUS PRECIOSA MORS HIC IN CONSPECTU DOMINI' (Figure 5.5). This pronouncement is identical to a widespread sequence that recalls Isaiah 57:1: 'The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart' (Kehrein, 1873, p.452). In the sequence, death in the visage of the Lord is still put forward literally. The epigraph articulates the act of looking at the *Johannesschüssel* as an act of seeing that swells until it is near the face of God, the *beata visio* (Trottmann, 1995, passim). Indeed, the *Johannesschüssel* freezes the fraction of a moment that makes possible an opening to the hereafter. Hence, it would seem that looking at the *Johannesschüssel* likewise channels a longing to see the impossible. The decapitated head must bring us to the visage: *In conspectu domini*.

The *Johannesschüssel* from Hamburg is surrounded by the Four Evangelists. This iconography evokes paraliturgical schemes, like the JHS monogram encircled with rays of light or angels, or similarly surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists (Figure 5.6) (Göttler, 1995, pp.292–5, ills 2–4). Indeed, the sense of sight is the most important liturgical components of the Eucharist. The *Johannesschüssel* is an important substitute liturgical object during the veneration of the Host. We have literary sources that show the object in Katharinenthal was showed together with the Host during the Corpus Christi procession.

Gazing upon the *Johannesschüssel* and the emphasis on seeing that emanates from this epigraph shows

<sup>5</sup> 'The choir sings: the harlot urges'.





Figure 5.5: *Johannesschüssel* with epigraphy EN QUO PERIT IUSTUS QUASI NON SIT DEO DILECTUS/CUM SIT EIUS PRECIOSA MORS HIC IN CONSPECTU DOMINI (15th century), Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe. (Photo: Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg)

how it is interwoven with the *ostensio*, graphically illustrating the role of blood, sacrifice and the lamb both within and without the liturgical space of dogma. Still, it is nevertheless astonishing that the attentive viewing of a gruesome, decapitated head should fulfil this channelling (Rubin, 1991, p.359). In addition to the fascination for the body part, there are the reconciliation and vulnerability, which according to Miri Rubin, are archotypically connected to the sacrificed body, including the powerful undercurrents of the *Johannesschüssel*. Where the *Johannesschüssel* as *Andachtsbild* allows itself, like Christ, to be taken up in empathy and *compassio*, it does so just as Christ does in *consummatio*.

Beholding the visage of John is a confrontation with the death of the last prophet and the Forerunner or Precursor. What is beheld is in fact the transition from the Old Covenant to the New. The *Johannesschüssel* is an image *im Augenblick des Todes* itself; it is the *Andachtsbild* of the transition to eternity. The ebbing away of breath, mind and soul at the threshold is strikingly depicted in the English alabasters. The curious painting (41 x 33cm) from the collection of Comte d'Oultremont in Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, attributed



Figure 5.6: Master W.A., *Christ monogram* (15th century), copper engraving, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. (Photo: Albertina, Vienna, Inv. DG1930/195)



Figure 5.7: Jan Mostaert (attributed), *Painted head of Saint John* (c. 1526–50), Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, private collection, Comte d'Oultremont. (© KIK-IRPA, Brussel, cliché KN 11185)



to Jan Mostaert (1526–50), also interprets the drama of death in this way (Figure 5.7) (Vanhouwaert, 2014). John's soul leaves his head, accompanied by weeping angels. John's head is itself weeping. The ephemeral nature of the tear – it has not yet dried – seeks to move the viewer to tears (*Andachtsbild*, *empathia*, *compassio*), but at the same time shows the freshness of the death (or near-death): the fraction of a moment that will soon lead to the crystallisation of the image (Nagy, 2000, pp.388–412). By extension, I believe we can also interpret the *Johannesschüssel* in the sense of this idea of 'transition'. Also, in Martin Hoffmann's (active in Basel c.1507–30) *Johannesschüssel* of 1515 in Strasbourg and Hans Gieng's (c.1525–62) *Johannesschüssel* of 1535 (Figure 5.8), for example, confrontation with the gaze, with the ecstasy of death, predominates.



Figure 5.8: Hans Gieng, *Johannesschüssel* (1535), Fribourg, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. (Photo: Museum für Kunst und Geschichte Freiburg, Primula Bosshard)

To the extent that the function of the *Andachtsbild* expanded during the late middle ages, the empathy of suffering seems also to have translated itself gradually into a conscious strategy of the gaze. The viewer was drawn into a form of seeing that transcended mere physical looking. He was conducted in spiritual transport to the invisible visage of God. The physical and symbolic affinities between the faces of John and Christ contributed significantly to this strategy (Kessler, 2000, p.35; Deshman, 1997, pp.518–46).

However, the gaze that emanates from the *Johannesschüssel* is somewhat different from Christ's: John does not look back, or is not all-seeing like the *vera icon*. The *Johannesschüssel* has an 'absorbing' the gaze. This does not mean that the *Johannesschüssel* is



Figure 5.9: *Johannesschüssel* (last quarter 15th century), Kremsmünster, Stiftssammlungen. (Photo: Bundesdenkmalamt Wien)

'gazeless'. With its own dead gaze, it channels the seeing of God behind him, after him, even if the eyes are closed, as with the *Johannesschüssel* in Kremsmünster, *Stiftssammlungen* (last quarter of the 15th century) (Figure 5.9) (Schultes, 1993, pp.657–62). Perhaps we should rather speak of a specifically inward-turned gaze. Looking at the *Johannesschüssel* brings about a tumbling into a black hole, into an abyss. Hence, in John's absorbing gaze we can reach that which cannot be seen physically: the indication of the invisible visage of God.

Caroline Schuster Cordone has called the paradoxical exchange of gazes between the *Johannesschüssel* and the viewer the *Mittlerfunktion* (Schuster Cordone, 2003, pp.1–3). Artists would rather depict the dying than the dead. The border between life and death marks the moment at which the *Johannesschüssel* could arise *as image*. In this sense, too, John the Baptist mediating Old and New Covenant is a true mediator. The fraction of a moment taken up by the *Johannesschüssel* in order to be transformed from life to image expresses itself in the iconography of flowing: the still fluid blood from the neck or the still falling tear. Here lies the difference from Christ. Where Christ as living image has become an icon – the *vera icon* – John's iconic image is seized at the moment when he is flung out of time. From this nuclear fuel an incredible energy was released (I call it all-absorbing), an energy that quite fascinated the medieval and early modern individual, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Indeed, the *Johannesschüssel* has a specific impact: the black, devouring orifice, the open wound palpitates, the eye stares, the mouth gapes. The consequence of the inward-turned gaze is the inside-out: tongue, teeth and organs (Vandenbroeck, 2000, p.119). The *Johannesschüssel* satisfies man's old desire for the image prototype that unabashedly makes itself felt in the shock of absorption and abyss. This shock is of course the archetypal *apotropaion* defined in the Medusa phantasm (to which I return later). The *Johannesschüssel*, with its open mouth and open neck, invites us to a 'visual penetration', to a *per-spicere*.

## 2. The absorbing gaze

Let me examine the open mouth and the open neck more closely. The mouth refers to the entrance and exit of our breath. The open mouth evokes John's final dying breath, the border marked by the *Johannesschüssel*. The mouth is a portal into the dizzying depths of the body. It introduces us to the interiority of the body, which is taboo. Through the mouth, things – including food – disappear, so that it becomes the antechamber of the throat. The mouth, together with the tongue, is one of the organs of speech referring to John's prophetic phrases such as 'Ecce agnus dei'<sup>6</sup> (John 1:29) and 'Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto' (John 1:22–23) (Suckale, 2004, pp.327–40, esp. p.328).<sup>7</sup>

In Hebrew tradition, the head and the mouth are the *loci* of the so-called *rûach*, meaning: breath, wind, speech. Its complex semantic ramifications were used in the Bible for wind, for God's voice and His *spiritus*, for the life breath of humankind (*pneuma*), and for the powerful relationships of prophets with God through the divine 'voice' and 'breath' of inspiration (Lys, 1962, *passim*). Besides the *rûach*, the tongue is also a bodily *pars pro toto* of the prophet's wisdom. The tongue joins with the fire of God (Isaiah 30:27). The Holy Ghost descended on the apostles in 'cloven tongues like as of fire' (Acts 2:3). The tongue, just like the hand, is the revelation of God (Glazov, 2001, *passim*). The tongue has the power of life and death (Proverbs 18:21). The tongue is 'cleft' – indeed, again, mediator (Benthien, 2001, pp.104–32, esp. pp.110–3). The tongue is the organ of taste (which is also connected to *tactus*) (Korsmeyer, 1999/2002, pp.19–22); hence, it deals with its split form as a sword: it distinguishes good and evil (De Souzaenelle, 1991, pp.364–8). Because the tongue speaks, it also has a judicial connotation. Tongue is speech. Thus, the tongue is also connected to the *glossolalia* of the orator and the prophet. Apocryphal legends added to the biblical

story that Herodias pierced not without coincidence the Baptist's tongue with a needle in malice (Combs Stuebe, 1969, p.5). She wounded, so to speak, John's fire of speech and his power of judgment. This legend is believed to date back to the 4th century. The motif became a favourite subject in religious drama (Combs Stuebe, 1969, p.5; Arndt and Kroos, 1969, pp.301ff.; Thulin, 1930). Jerome (347–420) says in his *Apologia contra Rufinum*: 'Because the one did not want to hear (*audire*) the truth, the tongue (*linguam*) (= the truth of the speech) was wronged' (Jerome, 1982, PL23, col.510). John is the tongue, the voice in the wilderness that was not heard. The tongue attaches itself in other words also to the sense of hearing.

Hearing is an extremely primal sense: it is the first and last sense; in principle, it precedes speech (Wulf, 1993, pp.9–15). After all, hearing is the sense that the foetus first masters in the womb: the foetus hears the mother's voice. Since Jewish tradition, the relation between the form of the foetus and the ear is a deep archetype. It is also said that hearing is the last sense to fall away during the process of dying, and with comatose patients the only sense to remain latent.

In the mother's womb, the child is nothing but a big ear, it receives all the information of the world of archetypes in which it bathes, just as the sounds that reach it from the mother's world. It listens, records, but it does not yet know ... As the foetus, the big ear in the mother's womb, is not born before its blood is totally bearer of its breath, its NAME in its origin, the complete foetus in the cosmic matrix, the human being, thus becomes the big ear that hears its NAME; it is ready to be born. Because it knows its name, it becomes word. The heart that is beating to listen. Listening it will see.<sup>8</sup>

(De Souzaenelle, 1991, p.351, pp.356–7)

This uterine, foetal character of the sense of hearing is intensely thematised in the life of John the Baptist. Luke 1:5–45 tells how John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth, who was considered barren. Her husband

8 'Dans le ventre de la mère, l'enfant n'est qu'une grande oreille, il reçoit l'information totale du monde des archétypes dans lequel il baigne, ainsi que les sons, qui lui parviennent du monde maternel. Il entend, enregistre, mais ne le sait pas encore ... De même que le fœtus, grande oreille dans le ventre maternel, ne naît que lorsque son sang est totalement porteur de son souffle, son NOM (sic) en germe, de même, fœtus accompli dans la matrice cosmique, l'homme devient alors la grande oreille qui entend son NOM (sic); il est prêt à naître. Parce qu'il connaît son nom, il devient verbe. Le cœur que batte pour entendre. Entendant il verra'. English translation: Georg Geml.

6 'Behold the lamb of God'.

7 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness'.

Zechariah was the priest of Abijah. The angel Gabriel appeared to him during a sacrifice of incense to announce the arrival of his son John. At John's birth, Zechariah is struck dumb. His lost voice passes into the prophetic voice of his son. Already in the womb, the boy would be filled with the Holy Spirit, said the angel. He would be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah. This is followed by the episode of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary and Mary's meeting with Elizabeth. On this occasion, the child, John, leaped in Elizabeth's womb, making her cry out to her cousin Mary: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!' (Luke 1:42) (Hüe, 2002, pp.111–30).

At any rate, speech and hearing work together in a knowledge-generating system that precedes the visual-literary epistemology of Plato (429–347 BCE) (Wulf, 1993, pp.9–10). Speech and aural communication belong to an oral culture, in which acoustic mimesis – the passing on of values and insights – predominates over written and hence visible laws. Oral culture is a culture of 'intercession', in which prophets play an important role. For this reason, in certain cultures the tension between speaking and remaining silent is extremely dual and fundamental: it is a tension controlled by the boundaries of taboo (Hahn, 1999, pp.204–31). Here we arrive elliptically at the text of the Gospel in which the incest taboo is pronounced and judged, and which constitutes the occasion for revenge and death, an intuition that Jerome also formulated in his association of *audire* and *linguam*. And if we witness its effects in drama, insignia and epigraphs, then it appears that precisely these archaic laws of communication were singled out. We remember the Naumburg epigraph (Figure 5.4): urging (the voice), dancing (the voiceless that asks to be gazed upon), commanding (the voice), beheading (which leads to absolute 'voicelessness': taboo) (Palazzo, 2012, pp.51–7).

One could view John the Baptist as the last embodiment of the acoustic system of knowledge. His decapitation is in this sense a sacrifice made for the sake of seeing God-become-flesh. In this sense, the *Johannesschüssel* is also metaphorically a mediator: a link between the cultural shifts in the hierarchy of the senses (Paravicini Bagliani, 2002, *passim*; Nordenfalk, 1976, pp.17–28). The beheading of John the Baptist forms the end of the cry in the desert – a necessary silencing of the *vox* which leaves room for the *Logos*. 'That golden mouth, now bloodless, speaks no longer', says Ambrose (*De virginibus* III 5, 25: 6–31) (Quasten, 1988, p.167). Augustine (354–430), in his 288th sermon, *In natali Ioannis baptistae* (*De voce et verbo*), puts the following words into the mouth of St John: "I am not the Christ, he said, nor Elijah, nor the prophet." And

the question came: 'Who are you, then?' John replied: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord" (Bastiaensen, 2003, pp.13–26). Because John has to decrease, in order that Christ can increase, an important cycle was recognised in the solstice of June (when the light decreases) and the solstice of December (when with the coming of Christ the light increases) (Baert, 2011, pp.323–66).

Returning to the problematic of the *Andachtsbild*, the *Johannesschüssel* challenges the viewer not only by the (paradoxical) tumbling exchange of glances, but also by a 'sonoric' communication, or more precisely, by the silencing of his voice ('Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto', John 1:22–23). To look at the *Johannesschüssel* is to realise that we can no longer hear his voice. The decapitation has reduced the seat of the vocal chords, the prophet himself, to an acoustic wilderness. The other man, Christ, can at last unveil himself as the true Saviour. This brings me to the third and last problem: the phenomenological tension between head and visage, between platter and veil with an excursion on silence(s).

### 3. Head and visage: silence at last

In Indo-European semantics, the root of 'head' and 'skull' is also the root of dish, platter, pan and recipient (Root/Lemma: (s)kel-1, in <http://dnghu.org/indoeuropean.html>). Heads and skulls are archetypically speaking hollow tools for keeping liquids in a cultic context. Head and platter are essentially equal. The *Johannesschüssel* is intrinsically a tautology. The relation head-platter is intrinsic. Moreover, without the platter, John's beheading could never have become an image, become 'some-thing'. Or rather, without the recipient that catches the head, bears it and hands it over, the *Augenblick* of the decapitation could not have remained crystallised in the fraction of a moment. The platter is the bearer that has caught up the image and presents it plastically as *memoria*. The platter says: 'it has truly happened' (Böhme, 1995, pp.379–84, esp. p.384). I am 'artifact' now. Also the complicated constructions and deconstructions of the presentation of the mother object – the relic skull in Amiens with its layers of skull, cover, mask, and even an 'inner visage' made of wax inside, illustrate the conceptual 'wrestling' needed to make of the skull a 'bearable' image. In fact, pilgrims did not denote the relic as a head, but as a *facies*, a face.

The addition of wax plays a bizarre role. Georges Didi-Huberman refers to skulls in Jericho and Mycenae that were covered with clay, so that an impression was formed (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p.57). According to the author, these death's heads, particularly those where the face has been reconstructed with clay or wax (from



within), served literally as a matrix: the borrowed form, the form of the impression and the modelled form crystallised in one and the same object.

At this moment, the skull becomes a vessel of an open dialectic game through the three-dimensional invention: game of counter-form and form, game of dissimilarity, of disfiguration and refiguration. Game of the disappearing form (the decaying flesh erases the face) and the forming form (the drying clay sticks on the skull as the plaster in the model or the milk in the cheese mould).<sup>9</sup>

(Didi-Huberman, 2008, p.57)

The wax in the relic of Amiens is not used, as one would expect, to reconstruct the outward appearance of the face. The wax bears the imprint of the secret: the interior of the skull. The anti-secret also becomes an anti-mask. In his essay *Être crâne*, Georges Didi-Huberman expresses this otherwise: 'What's fascinating first on the human skull, is its inside; it is the "cavity of the eyeholes", with its hidden "depth"; it is, in general, all the visible holes' (Didi-Huberman, 2000, p.15).<sup>10</sup> The *facies* of Amiens is the *signum* of an inversive visage, of an 'interior visage'.

Medusa is the archetypal bridge between beheading and face; of making its gaze 'bearable' (Marin [1977] 1997, p.174). This perspective gives rise to several analogies with the *Johannesschüssel* in terms of form, function and phantasm. Like the Medusa, the *Johannesschüssel* thematises decapitation as the genesis of the image. In death itself the image freezes; in a fraction of a moment the head coagulates into an artefact, resulting in the projection of powerful forces. Like the Medusa there is the physical analogy with respect to the face: the open mouth, the eyes of death, the gushing neck and, last but not least, the snakes and hair fanning out from the head. Many *Johannesschüsseln* have pointed tendrils that project on all sides. In the exemplar from Kremsmünster, John's hair has become distinctly serpentine. John's prodigious locks are treated as a typical sign of his prophetic

9 'Le crâne, à ce moment, devient réceptacle d'un jeu dialectique ouvert sur l'invention plastique: jeu de la contre-forme et de la forme, jeu de la dissemblance, de la défiguration et de la refiguration. Jeu de la forme disparaissante (la chair qui, en se putréfiant, anéantit le visage) et de la forme en formation (la glaise qui, en séchant, prend dans le crâne comme le plâtre dans un moule ou comme le lait dans une faisselle)'. English translation: Georg Geml.

10 'Ce qui fascine d'abord, dans le crâne humain, c'est son côté interne; c'est la "cavité des orbites", avec sa "profondeur" dissimulée; c'est, en général, tous les "trous visibles"'. English translation: Georg Geml

'wildness'. Nevertheless, this characteristic will attach itself to the Medusa as genre by the end of the middle ages. With the increasing popularity of the Medusa as a renaissance motif, we notice a soundless osmosis between the *Johannesschüssel* and the Medusa, between his hair and her snakes, between his neck and her neck, between his blood and hers. This is strikingly evident in the tondo painted in/around 1464–68 by Giovanni Bellini, which is now in the *Musei Civici* of Pesaro, but was formerly in the sacristy of San Giovanni in Pesaro.

Like the Medusa, the functions of the *Johannesschüssel* seem to relate to the *apotropaic*. The uses to which it was put were highly stratified according to the various social experiences of religion. With the *Johannesschüssel*, the cosmic mimesis of nature and again the healing rituals come to the foreground. Allow me to touch on the solstice celebrations of June 24, with their excessive dancing and the many local customs and ramifications brought by the motifs of fire, epilepsy and solstice anxiety, described by the French ethnographer Claude Gaignebet. I suggest furthermore that these rituals became a portal as an 'event', a laborious process that must be coupled with fear and dumb astonishment – that is, with the silence or speechlessness (Gaignebet, 1986, pp.351–6). This brings me to the throat as anthropological phantasm.

The throat – *gula* in Latin – in most languages makes use of the sound pattern G-R-G. The word *gorgo* is in fact related to this with derivations in *gurgel*, *gurguli*, *gorges*, *gorge* (Root/lemma: *g°er-l*, *g°er* in <http://dnghu.org/indoeuropean.html>). And even today, the church of San Giovanni in Venice is called *San Gorgo* by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Again, in Indo-European etymology this phonetic root also means 'passage'. The throat is a tube, a tunnel, a passage, a transition. On the basis of this connotation, the throat also reflects the uterus, or the dynamics of what has been 'swallowed up' and can be vomited forth again (*hysteria*) (Kristeva, 1998; Schneider, 1976; Veith, 1965). In this respect it is most telling that the Hebrew word *nepesh*, a word with a wide semantic range that is often translated as 'soul', initially denoted 'throat', the physical *locus* of the life breath and thus related to the meaning of *rûach* (Brotzman, 1988, pp.400–9). To cut the throat of a victim is to fundamentally cut him off from life (Shaw, 1996, pp.269–312, esp. p.273 n.10 and p.305). The exhibitionism of the *Johannesschüssel* concerns the opening of all possible openings, with the tube of the throat being the most obsessive opening of all. With this G-R-G phantasm the *Johannesschüssel* opens the breach with life itself, the connecting tunnel that is now cut off. So I suggest here in fact that the exhibitionist drive in the *Johannesschüssel* channels elliptically,

paradoxically also a fascination for the beginning of life itself ... *inter natos*.

The connection between throat, John, solstice and silence is in fact already anchored in the passage from the first chapter of Luke (1:5–45) mentioned before. When the angel announces to the aged Zechariah that he shall have a child, the old man can scarcely believe his ears, and he becomes mute instead. Indeed, Zechariah will only regain his voice at the moment he writes his son's name on a tablet. The voice of Zechariah is given through the name of his son, 'the voice' of the new prophet Elijah. Jacobus de Voragine also says Zechariah's losing his voice was a fitting analogy, for the voice was born and let the (old) law remain silent (Ryan, 1993, I, p.329). Silence is truth and recommended to the seekers of that truth (Kamper and Wulf, 1992, p.325ff). There is yet another anecdote. When Paul the Deacon, a monk of Monte Cassino, lost his singing voice, he appealed to St John and begged him to give his voice back, as Zechariah was given his. So it happened, and he sang even more beautifully than before. By way of thanks, he composed the hymn that has been sung in churches on June 24 ever since: *Ut queant laxis resonare fibris mira gestorum famuli tuorum* (Gaignebet, 1986, p.356).<sup>11</sup>

The sacral silence is attributed in several cultures to the divine, to the *epitheton* of God, to the *locus* where God can be encountered, hence to the zone or to a medium that allows the traffic between man and God, between humankind and the world beyond. It is the individual silence of concentration, interiority and meditation (Paravicini Bagliani, 2010, pp.VII–XII; Pillinger, 2012, pp.685–9). But there is also another silence. It is a silence modelled after the cosmos, beyond the Pythagorean order of music and the heavenly bodies (Gaignebet, 1986, p.356). Nature astonishes us with such powerful silences in two ways: the silence of zenith and the silence of solstice.

In archaic Mediterranean culture the moment at which the sun passes the meridian at its zenith is a *mysterium* (De Labriolle, 1934, pp.46–54; De Fraigne, 1959, pp.372–83). Midday is the anxious moment of transition, of the motionless hour, when everything is enveloped in a net of light and astonishing quiet (Chevalier and Gheerbaert, 1996, p.358). There is scarcely a shadow. Pan is asleep now and everything and everybody must rest. In the landscape all is quiet, because nature has been struck dumb. The silence acquires the thickness of a holy place; the silence becomes a frightening *Gefühlsraum* (Schmitz, 1981,

pp.264–76), a tempered atmosphere, in which this fear is collectively and intersubjectively experienced. It is precisely in this density that the so-called *mysterium tremendum* arises.

The second silence of the solstice is the 'gorgonian' silence, intangibly terrifying but absolutely necessary in order to allow the greatest and most dangerous mysteries: to tilt, to clear the way for the sun, the portal, the transit. The solstice goes through the cosmic 'throat' which needs the mediation by silence: the *angoisse*, the anguish (Gaignebet, 1986, p.363). This silence is not so much a frightening *Gefühlsraum*, but more of a pause, an interval. This silence is the cosmic standstill (Macho, 1993, pp.104–16).

These reflections become surprisingly concrete in light of the solstice celebrations on St John's day. In Jumièges, the *Confratérie de Saint Jean*, in fact a brotherhood of masons, celebrated their patron on June 23 and 24 (Gaignebet, 1986, pp.363ff.). The chairman was dressed as a wild man in a suit of green leaves and herbs (*le loup vert*). On June 23, processions were held and before midnight a dinner was held during which complete silence was maintained. At the stroke of midnight, the commencement of June 24, the hymn *Ut queant* was sung. Afterward the participants were permitted to speak freely. The oral mastery of nature also implied the interval of sound and silence.

If we link this back to the multi-sensorial response of the *Johannesschüssel* – speech (tongue), sight (eyes) and hearing (silence) – and its 'embodiment of the acoustic system of knowledge', we now understand that this system of knowledge also implies silence. The interval that possesses the secret of allowing something to pass – the tube, the transit, the throat, the uterus – makes use of cosmic silence in the fraction of a second: just before the turn. The *Johannesschüssel* seeks the vortex of all the senses, but at the end it demands us a vanishing point, an interval, a pause: silence indeed.

Like a courier who has survived a military defeat and panting has delivered his message, all I want to do from now on is keep silent and remember.

Sándor Márai, *Egy polgár vallomásai*, 1935

<sup>11</sup> 'So that your servants may, with loosened voices, resound the wonders of your deeds'. English translation: Matthew D.Thibeault.

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